

# Musonius Rufus and women's education

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Educationalists – that is those who theorize about how people are best educated – might seem to be a very modern phenomenon. But Liz Gloyn shows us here that theorizing about education was already active in antiquity, and not just among utopian thinkers. What is more, that theorizing even extended to thinking about women's education.

Today, we take it for granted that boys and girls will be able to learn the same things during their education. In the ancient world there was no expectation that boys and girls should follow the same curriculum, let alone that they should be taught together. Advanced Roman education taught skills essential for success in public life; as such, it was effectively viewed as unnecessary for women, who would never formally take an active part in politics or law.

The ideas of the Stoic philosopher Musonius Rufus, who was most active under the reigns of Nero and Vespasian, stand out against this background. The fourth discourse that has come down to us in his name is titled 'Whether daughters should be given the same education as sons'. It argues that, contrary to traditional practice, daughters and sons should be taught the same things in the same way.

Musonius does not believe that 'education' is just about preparing people to move on to legal or political careers. Instead, his argument relies on two important Stoic philosophical ideas. First, the Stoics argued that everybody should learn not clever oratory or mathematics, but how to be virtuous. If we know how to behave virtuously, then we can achieve happiness. Second, the Stoics believed that everybody had the same capacity for virtue, regardless of gender or social class – the special characteristic of all humans is reason, which allows us all to possess virtue.

Musonius begins by observing that both horses and dogs are trained in the same way for their tasks regardless of sex, but that humans go about things differently:

*In the case of man, however, it would seem to be felt necessary to employ some special and exceptional training and education for males over females, as if it were not essential that the same virtues*

*should be present in both alike, in man and woman, or as if it were possible to arrive at the same virtues, not through the same but through different instruction.*

If we want sons and daughters both to possess virtue, they have to be given the same training in the same way – if you educate them in different ways, you'll get different outcomes.

The desirable virtues are the four cardinal virtues originally proposed by Plato – courage, justice, self-control, and wisdom. Musonius argues that women need each of these as much as men do. For instance, nobody has use for a foolish man or woman, and a woman needs self-control when eating and drinking just as a man does. Even courage, *andreia* in the Greek, benefits women, despite what its etymology ('manliness' is a more literal translation) might suggest – the accomplishments of the Amazons in battle show that women have the capacity for courage, as does the way mothers defend their children from danger. The problem is not that women are not capable of being brave, says Musonius:

*If, therefore, something of [the Amazons'] courage is lacking in other women, it is due to lack of use and practice rather than because they were not endowed with it.*

Since men and women have the same nature, they should both receive the same education, just like dogs and horses, in order to make the most of that nature. If a man and a woman needed to learn the flute or harp well enough to earn a living, they would need the same education; why should it be different when giving a man and a woman the skills they need to live well?

Musonius admits that there are *some* differences between men and women. Men, he says, tend to be stronger than

women, and thus physical tasks should be assigned accordingly. However, some men may be weaker and thus more fitted to take on lighter tasks; conversely, some women may be stronger and thus suitable to perform more strenuous labour:

*For all human tasks, I am inclined to believe, are a common obligation and are common for men and women, and none is necessarily appointed for either one exclusively, but some pursuits are more suited to the nature of one, some to the other, and for this reason some are called men's work and some women's.*

When it comes to the matter of virtue, both men and women are equally suited to pursue it. For that reason, lessons about what is right and what is wrong should begin in earliest childhood, so that children's characters are shaped correctly from infancy. Both boys and girls must

*learn the same lessons which are in the highest degree appropriate to the character of each and supremely important.*

But before we praise Musonius for being a feminist ahead of his time, it's worth remembering what he thinks women need philosophy *for*. He wants to help women live their normal lives well, not change their everyday activities:

*I do not mean that women should possess technical skill and acuteness in argument. It would be quite superfluous, since they will use philosophy for the ends of their life as women.*

Musonius is not suggesting that what women do from day to day will change if they learn philosophy. He is arguing that they will perform the duties and responsibilities they already have better if they are in full possession of the virtues. While Musonius accepts that daughters and sons have the potential to grow up into equally virtuous men and women, he does not suggest that they might use their abilities for the same sorts of tasks – even the comment about human tasks being common to everyone is limited to physical labour and not things like law courts or

the senate. Virtue is about living life as it is to the best of one's ability, not about revolutionizing the way things are. In Musonius, then, we see a thinker who challenges some of the preconceptions of his society, but who also quietly assumes things about the future lives of boys and girls which are very far from the opportunities open to those who now read him.

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